

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Sounding Surrealist Historiography: Listening to *Concrete Island*

Jeannette Baxter

Anglia Ruskin University

Abstract:

What does Ballardian inner space sound like? Starting from this question, I lend an ear to *Concrete Island* ([1974] 1985), the second of Ballard's 'concrete and steel trilogy', and the most sonorous of his inner-space fictions. Paying particular attention to the sound-space-matter interface of *Concrete Island*, I explore how the text's soundscape engages in a process of Surrealist historiography; that is, a counter-historical process of enquiry that, if we listen to it, mobilises alternative ways of thinking about the inter-animating presences of history, subjectivity, memory and technology in postwar culture. In this respect, *Concrete Island* builds on the counter-historical impulses of preceding short stories and novels, such as *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) and *Crash* ([1973] 1995), which force the reader into visual confrontations with postwar histories. But it does so by opening Ballard's predominantly visual mode of Surrealist historiography up to questions of sound, noise and aurality. Drawing on related writings by André Breton and Jean Luc Nancy, a reader with a keen ear for Surrealism, I explore the importance of hearing, sound and aurality alongside vision in the shaping of the modern self. I then consider *Concrete Island's* soundscape in relation to two forms of visual archive on display throughout the novel: a visual archive of the forgotten past; and a visual archive of an exhausted future. Bringing Ballard's soundscape and visual archives into dialogue, I suggest, might just make room for forgotten histories to sound in ways that encourage us to see ourselves and our histories differently.

Keywords: J.G. Ballard, Surrealism; historiography; resonant subject; inner space; listening.

Author contact: Jeannette.Baxter@anglia.ac.uk

The images of surrealism are the iconography of inner space [...] surrealism is the first movement [...] to place 'the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible'. This calculated submission of the impulses and fantasies of our inner lives to the rigours of time and space [...] produces a heightened or alternative reality beyond that familiar to our sight and senses. What uniquely characterises this fusion of the outer world of reality and the inner world of the psyche (which I have termed 'inner space') is its redemptive and therapeutic power. (Ballard [1966] 1996: 84)

'The Coming of the Unconscious', from which this opening quotation is taken, is an important document in Ballard's oeuvre for at least two reasons. Firstly, it maps out the extent to which visual Surrealism shapes and energises the Ballardian imagination. Secondly, it delineates the Surrealist topographies of inner space, those shifting imaginative geographies in which the outer world of reality and the inner world of the psyche fuse in a number of dislocating ways. Ballard's stress on the visual dimensions of inner space is noticeable not just from the outset of his essay, but also in the way in which he develops his thinking in relation to a number of Surrealist paintings: 'The Elephant Celebes' (1921) and 'The Eye of Silence' (1943-44) by Max Ernst; 'The Disquieting Muses' (1916-18) by Giorgio de Chirico; Oscar Dominguez's various works of 'Decalcomania'; 'The Persistence of Memory' (1931) by Salvador Dalí; and 'The Annunciation' (1930) by René Magritte. By paying specific attention to pictorial shape, form, symbol and perspective, Ballard encourages us to look beyond the surface of the artwork, drawing our eye to the differentiated physical and psychological realities that lie concealed within these visual Surrealist landscapes.

Whilst Ballard's emphasis on the visual dimensions of inner space provokes rich and complex questions about time, memory and history, it does so at the risk of turning a deaf ear to the equally rich and complex auditive dimensions of his fictional landscapes. This leads one to ask: what does Ballardian inner space *sound* like? I want to offer some responses to this question by lending an ear to *Concrete Island* ([1974] 1985), the second of Ballard's 'concrete and steel trilogy' (Amis 1996: 8) and the most sonorous of his inner-space fictions. The first couple of chapters, in particular, are dominated by loud and intrusive traffic sounds: initially, we hear the exploding tyre that precipitates Maitland's crash; this is soon accompanied by the relentless blaring of car horns, the drumming of endless traffic streams, the roaring of car and truck engines, the hissing and slamming of air-brakes. As the novel progresses, these hard, technological sounds resound alongside, and often in tension with, a cacophony of softer noises, including a variety of voices (human, non-human, textual and intertextual), inner sounds, real and imagined noises, echoes, silences, and different forms of music.

My ambition to listen to the soundscape of *Concrete Island* may seem a little misplaced given Ballard's oft-quoted confession that visual cultures (paintings, photography, film and T.V.) played a much more significant role in his life and work than auditory cultures: 'To be honest – I don't listen to music. It's just a blank spot' (Ballard with Savage 1978). But this is not the same as saying that sound is an absent or insignificant presence within and across Ballard's extensive body of work. 'The Sound-Sweep' ([1960] 2001), for instance, is an early interrogation of the shifting relationship

between postwar soundscapes and subjectivities, focusing as it does on the intersecting lives of Madame Giaconda, an Opera Singer whose career is in ruins with the advent of ultrasonic music (there being little place for the human singing voice in the clean, synthetic soundscapes of the story), and a mute sound-sweep who, armed with a 'sonovac', is tasked to cleanse unwanted 'residues of sound' that have been absorbed into the city's landscapes and architectures (Ballard [1960] 2001: 106). Furthermore, contemporaneous works such as 'The Voices of Time' ([1960] 2001) and *The Drowned World* ([1962] 2001) develop the idea of sounds having a persistent, material presence in order to pose difficult questions about historical violence, trauma, memory and repression. Anyone who has listened to the chattering landscapes of either text cannot fail, just like Ballard's protagonists, to be haunted by the restless voices of histories as they refuse all attempts to quieten them.

Here, I want to suggest that the soundscape of *Concrete Island* engages in a process of Surrealist historiography; that is, a counter-historical process of enquiry that, if we listen to it, mobilises alternative ways of thinking about the inter-animating presences of history, subjectivity, memory and technology in postwar culture. In this respect, *Concrete Island* builds on the counter-historical impulses of preceding short stories and novels, such as *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*, which force the reader (over and over again) into visual confrontations with violent and undocumented postwar histories. But it does so by opening Ballard's predominantly visual mode of Surrealist historiography up to questions of sound, noise and aurality. For this reason, I want to discuss *Concrete Island* in relation to two different, yet related, critical texts: 'Silence is Golden' ([1946] 1978), André Breton's important, but often overlooked, attempt to re-map postwar Surrealism along auditory and visual lines; and Jean Luc Nancy's *Listening* (2007), which sets out to rethink the limits of Western philosophy as a sense-making practice rooted firmly in the visual in order to make room for the philosophical possibilities of listening (etymologically, 'theory' comes from the Greek 'theōria' meaning 'looking at, viewing, contemplation, speculation, insight and beholding' (OED)). Nancy has always had a keen ear for Surrealism, having engaged critically with Georges Bataille's writings on communication and community (see *The Inoperative Community* 1985-86), and responded creatively to the death of André Breton in 1966 with a series of prose poems. First published in the French literary magazine *Esprit*, 'André Breton' (Nancy 1966) is not just a eulogy for the hugely influential Surrealist poet and thinker, it is also something of a postwar literary manifesto for the persistence of Surrealism within and across the arts, literature and every-day experience.

What connects Ballard, Breton and Nancy, and what concerns me here, is their shared desire to rethink the relationship between sight, sound and subjectivity in a postwar culture that was negotiating simultaneously the atrocities of recent history and the transformative experiences of modern technologies. I want therefore to organise my exercise in listening to *Concrete Island* around two key points. First, I explore the question of what it sounds like to be human in Ballard's novel. Whilst Steven Connor has noted how the modern self 'constitutes itself in terms of the epistemological regime of the eye which has become increasingly dominant in the West since the Renaissance' (2004: 54), I explore the ways in which *Concrete Island* establishes the importance of hearing, sound and

aurality alongside vision in the shaping of the modern self. Second, I go on to consider *Concrete Island's* soundscape in relation to two forms of visual archive on display throughout the novel: a visual archive of the forgotten past, evident in traces of an older urban history of the island; and a visual archive of an exhausted future, evident in piles of technological refuse that clutter the textual landscape. Bringing Ballard's soundscape and visual archives into dialogue, I suggest, might just make room for forgotten histories to sound in ways that encourage us to see the relationship between the past and the present differently.

Resonant Subjectivity: Sounding the Self

In 'Silence is Golden', an essay first published in the American magazine *Modern Music*, André Breton sketches an alternative trajectory for postwar Surrealism, one based along auditory lines of influence. As Franklin Rosemont observes in his introductory notes to the essay, Breton's shift towards auditory art and culture was partly influenced by his exposure to American black music, especially Bebop, whilst he was living in exile in New York in the early 1940s. But it was also influenced by Breton's ambition to reinvigorate and redirect postwar Surrealism in a specific way, namely through the 'recasting of certain principles' of music and poetry in order to '*reunify hearing* to the same degree that we must determine to [...] *reunify sight*' (1978: 267, emphases in original). Given Breton's unashamed ocularcentrism in 'Surrealism and Painting', a key interwar Surrealist text that deemed the 'auditive image [...] inferior to the visual image' ([1928] 1972: 1-2), his postwar turn to the aesthetic and philosophical potential of music and sound may seem a little surprising. However, as Breton notes, Surrealism has always been tuned in to sound, be that in the form of experimental music (we might think of the avant-garde compositions of Erik Satie, George Antheil and John Cage, Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrète*, or John Oswald's postmodern Plunderphonics), or in the forms of poetry and prose. As Breton puts it:

Never, to the same extent as in surrealist writing [...] have poets so relied on the *tonal* value of words [...] I already have protested against the designation 'visionary' being lightly applied to poets [...] Great poets have been 'auditives', not visionaries. (1978: 268-9, emphases in original)

Maintaining that Surrealism's drive to make manifest the intangible nature of the unconscious has always possessed an auditory impulse, Breton asserts Surrealism's continued relevance for a postwar culture increasingly shaped and energised by developments in popular music. Yet, beyond this, 'Silence is Golden' announces Surrealism's renewed enquiries into what it means to be human by seeking new ways to represent the complexities of contemporary visual and auditory experience, and by rethinking the relationship between seeing and hearing.

Concrete Island chimes with Breton's essay in a number of interesting ways. Most notably, it is replete with tensions between seeing and hearing. Maitland, a successful London architect who has built a career on the creation of visual spectacles, has crashed

on to a patch of wasteland somewhere close to the M4 junction. Given the low-lying geography of the island, Maitland soon realises that vision is not a particularly dependable form of perception because he is either looking up steep embankments to the road above, or he is being observed by drivers from a height, at high speed, and often with the glaring sun in their eyes. Visual perspective is therefore often skewed:

Magnified by the roof and walls of the overpass, the noise reverberated off the concrete roadway around Maitland, drowning his first shouts [...] Lower in the western sky, the strong sun shone directly into the drivers' eyes [...] He waved his hat in the exhaust-filled air, shouting over his shoulder into the engine noise [...] Horns blared endlessly [...] None of the drivers could see him, let alone hear his dry-throated croak. (Ballard 1985: 14-6)

As Pete Merriman observes in *Driving Spaces: A Cultural-Historical Geography of England's M1 motorway* (2007), the late 1960s and early 1970s saw a significant shift in attitudes towards motorways and motoring. Even though motorways had been a significant political and economic 'component in Britain's post-war reconstruction' and motoring had 'caught the public's imagination', producing 'distinctively new experiences, sensations, subjectivities and ways of being', the 'emergence of new environmental and conservation discourses' (Merriman 2007: 21-2) transformed the ways in which motorways were thought, spoken and written about. Taking *Concrete Island* as a literary marker of this cultural shift, Merriman notes how Ballard's novel sounds a number of pressing social and environmental concerns: the transience of modern lived experience, ever-accelerating work and consumer capitalist cultures, and noise pollution. Indeed, we can hear in the passage above just how noisy motorway landscapes can be: the ambient noise of high-speed traffic is amplified by the motorway's concrete architectures; and the reverberating sounds – what we might hear as Ballard's own rendition of *musique concrète* – are thoroughly intrusive, drowning out Maitland's desperate shouts for help.

If the W. H. Auden-authored film *Night Mail* (1936) offered a poetic soundbite of the ways in which railway transportation transformed the sounds of real and literary landscapes in the inter-war period, *Concrete Island* is an extended sound recording of the transformation of real and literary postwar landscapes by motorway developments. Yet, our ears are not pricked up to the novel's soundscape because Ballard merely amplifies it. Rather, what is noteworthy is the way in which Ballard carefully differentiates the sounds produced by the traffic streams: tyres explode, skid and hum; horns blare and scream; air-brakes hiss, slam and detonate; engines roar and drone. I will return to the conspicuous nature of some of these auditive verbs at a later point. For now, it is worth noting that *Concrete Island* calls for an act of close reading that is also an act of close listening, one that demands, as Nancy puts it, a 'listening subject' who is attuned to variations in 'accent, tone, timbre, resonance, and sound' (2007: 3) whilst also being alive to the tensions and instabilities of listening.

In this context, it is not insignificant that the island onto which Maitland crashes is referred to as a labyrinth. Specifically, the island is part of a 'labyrinth of motorways' (Ballard 1985: 44) connected to the Westway interchange, which is, in turn, a 'labyrinth of

ascent ramps and feeder lanes' (106). The natural topographies of the island also form a 'labyrinth of dips and hollows' (74) containing a 'maze-like' network of tunnels fashioned by the 'bull-like' Proctor (55), who is something of a modern day Minotaur. Within the Surrealist imagination, the labyrinth motif is frequently appropriated as an unconscious space, a typically nameless, nowhere place of displaced dreams, memories, desires and nightmares. Here, however, Ballard appropriates the labyrinth motif in order to give form to, and explore, the sound-space-matter interface. After all, labyrinth is the name given to the canals and inner chambers of the inner ear which are responsible for balance, orientation and hearing, as well as being a space (real or imagined) of disorientation and lostness.

Following the crash, Maitland is frequently confused and light-headed. Whilst these vertiginous symptoms are partly explained by a raging fever that induces hallucinations, they are also indicative of Maitland's profound sense of disorientation as he 'stumbles' around the labyrinthine island, often 'losing his way' (Ballard 1985: 47). As Andrzej Gasiorek observes in his reading of *Concrete Island*: 'all the conventional markers that enable modern subjects to conceptualise their identities and to orientate themselves in social space appear to have lost their meaning' (2005: 117). In the face of unreliable motorway route indicators, partially visible signs, and his own visual disturbances, Maitland soon discovers that it is by listening to the island's soundscape closely that he can begin to orientate himself:

It was eight ten A.M. He was surprised by the complete silence of the surrounding landscape, the uncanny absence of that relentless roar of rush-hour vehicles which had woken him the previous morning. It was almost as if some idle-minded technician responsible for maintaining the whole illusion of his marooning on the island had forgotten to switch on the sound [...] It was Saturday morning, and this explained the silence and absence of traffic. (Ballard 1985: 42-4)

At this point, Maitland's watch still works and adheres to clock time. However, it is only by paying attention to what he can and cannot hear that Maitland is able to work out what day of the week it is and how long, therefore, he has been stranded on the island. Listening emerges as an important survival strategy in *Concrete Island* then, and, in this respect, the novel's engagement with sound and aurality is more complex than that of earlier texts. As Matthew Gandy notes in a brief yet stimulating reading of 'The Sound-Sweep', Ballard's interest in soundscapes rests with forms of 'sonic disturbance' (2014: 38), meaning that sound is consistently linked with 'anxiety and dislocation' (34) in the early works. This undesirable aspect of sound still rings true, of course, in *Concrete Island*, but Maitland is alive to the fullness of acoustic resonances within and across the landscape; tuning his ear to the 'uncanny absence' of the rush hour noise, the stranded architect listens to, and comprehends, the various sounds of silence.

Despite Ballard's professed disinterest in auditory cultures, his work consistently belies an engagement with contemporaneous developments in experimental music. Whereas 'The Sound-Sweep' describes 'the conversion of music into ultrasound' in ways that 'resonate with the emerging tension in the 1950s between different modes of musical

composition and the shifting boundaries between music and “noise” (Gandy 2014: 38), *Concrete Island* echoes John Cage’s compositions of ‘non-intentional’ sound (Kahn 1997: 558), such as ‘Silent Prayer’ (1948) and ‘4’33’ (1952), both of which ventured to sound that there is no such thing as absolute silence. We hear this especially in the displaced character of Proctor, a ‘mental defective’ (Ballard 1985: 62) who says very little, but who is far from being a silent figure in the text. In actual fact, Proctor is an incredibly noisy character whose narrative presence is registered over and over again through a variety of sonic expulsions that his body makes: panting, heavy breathing, grunting, puffing, chewing, blowing, gasping, and wheezing (amongst others). It is also telling that Maitland first identifies Proctor by his ‘harsh, phlegmy breathing’ (62) rather than by any recognisable spoken voice.

In this respect, Nancy’s meditations on the re-conception of subjectivity along auditory lines are particularly useful. If we are to begin to hear what it sounds like to be in the world, Nancy suggests, we must listen to the various forms and resonances of voice: ‘a “voice”: we have to understand what sounds from a human throat without being language, which emerges from an animal gullet or from any kind of instrument, even from the wind in the branches: the rustling toward which we strain or lend an ear’ (2007: 22). As we can hear, Proctor sounds through a range of voices, most of which have very little to do with speaking, and it is by pausing to listen to the various ways in which Proctor sounds that we can begin to develop an alternative sense of his very being. With minimal access to language and with increasingly deteriorating vision, for instance, Proctor navigates the labyrinthine island by listening to it and by touching it:

[T]he tramp moved his head as if he could barely focus on any distant object and, like a bird, relied on being able to react to brief sharp movements against the background of a static visual field. [He was living] in this forgotten world whose furthest shores were defined only by the roar of automobile engines, the humming tyres and squeal of brake linings. For Proctor [...] the deep grass was his vital medium. His scarred hands felt the flexing stems, reading their currents as they seethed around him. (Ballard 1985: 90)

Here, Proctor’s body registers a shift traced by Nancy in his thinking on the listening subject; namely, a shift from ‘the phenomenological subject’, who is locked in ‘an intentional line of sight’, to a ‘resonant subject, an intensive spacing’ of sounds sounding and rebounding (2007: 21). One way of thinking about this is to hear Proctor as a body in process. Proctor sounds and is constantly sounding; his body is a ‘sonorous place [...] that becomes a subject insofar as sound resounds there’ (17). Even the vibrations or ‘voices’ of the deep grasses sound through Proctor’s body, locating him in space, and telling him the way back to ‘the sanctuary of the island and its green swaying ocean’ (Ballard 1985: 90). This is because, as Connor observes, ‘the self defined in terms of hearing rather than sight is a self imaged not as a point, but as a membrane; not as a picture, but as a channel through which voices, noises and musics travel’ (2004: 56). As resonant subject (or what Connor terms the ‘auditory self’) Proctor’s being is ‘organised around the principles of openness [and] responsiveness’, enabling him to ‘discover

[him]self in the midst of the world' (64) rather than seeking, as Maitland does, to assert dominance over the island.

Sounding and Seeing History: Recasting Surrealist Historiography

Even though Ballard's Surrealist enquiries into resonant subjectivity open up new and alternative ways of reconceiving what it is, and what it sounds like, to be human, *Concrete Island* is not to be understood in straightforwardly utopian terms. Proctor may reverberate with the sounds, vibrations and 'voices' of the natural world, but he is also resonant with anxieties; even within the maze-like shelter that he has built for himself, he sounds conspicuously vulnerable. We best hear this in another kind of 'voice' that resonates within and without Proctor's being; namely the voice of intertextuality. *Concrete Island* is full of literary voices as various as William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* ([1611] 2011), Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* ([1719] 2008), Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan stories and William Golding's *Pincher Martin* ([1956] 2015). However, the most resonant intertextual voice in the context of this essay is 'The Burrow' ('Der Bau') by Franz Kafka ([1931] 1995). A haunting tale about labyrinths and the anxieties of listening, Kafka's story echoes throughout *Concrete Island* on a number of levels. The shelter that Proctor builds is frequently referred to as a 'burrow', whilst he is described, like Kafka's anxious narrator, as a 'mole-like' creature, that 'scurries' and 'scuttles' along labyrinthine corridors (Ballard 1985: 85-7). Despite lining its walls with thick patchwork quilts, Proctor is unable to soundproof his burrow fully from the acoustics of an outside world that has rejected him on the grounds of difference. At the very least, this reminds us that whilst we can shut our eyes, we can never fully block our ears. For Proctor, it also means that, in a bid to protect his territory and himself, he engages, like the creature of Kafka's story, in angst-ridden acts of what Pierre Schaeffer has termed 'acousmatic listening', that is, a form of listening whereby the source of the sound heard, or 'sonorous object', remains unknown ([2004] 2007: 78).

Of course, Proctor's attempts to 'blunt and muffle all evidence of the world' (Ballard 1985: 86) beyond the soundscape of the island are evidently far more disabling than they are enabling. Maitland observes how the anxious listener is locked into a routine that is damned to fail: 'All night he moved restlessly around his burrow, keeping up a continuous pointless activity' (86). Furthermore, the unproductive and potentially dangerous nature of Proctor's sound-proofing attempts is amplified in the very form of the shelter that he is trying so desperately to modify; Proctor lives in an abandoned air-raid shelter, an architectural space in which the ability to not just hear, but hear clearly, can mean the difference between life and death. Connor notes:

The terror of the air-raid consists in its grotesquely widened bifurcation of visibility and hearing. On the one hand, there is the dominative distance of the bomber's aerial perspective [...] on the other, there is the absolute deprivation of sight for the victims of the air-raid on the ground, compelled as they are to rely on hearing to give them information about the incoming bombs. The inhabitants of cities subjected to aerial bombardment during the Second World War and after have had

to learn new skills of orienting themselves in this deadly new auditory field without clear coordinates or dimensions, but in which the tiniest variations in pitch and timbre can mean obliteration. (2004: 59)

In the violence of an air-raid, the 'blind' listener is at such a distinct disadvantage that any move to diminish the volume and clarity of sound still further is a fool-hardy exacerbation of the vision/hearing power dynamic inherent in aerial warfare. For Proctor, one implication of his selective hearing is that his chances of survival on the island are significantly diminished; already 'half-blinded' (Ballard 1985: 90) by cataracts, and therefore unable to see the perceived threats around him, Proctor's hearing is a dominant sense that needs to attune itself to the 'fullness of sound', including its 'darker attributes as trespasser, invader of territory, agent of instability [...] unreliable witness' (Toop 2010: xiv). It is only by opening his ears up to sinister or unwanted resonances that Proctor can hope to be in tune with the island's soundscape and his own resonant subjectivity.

It is worth drawing attention to at least two further implications of Proctor's conspicuous relationship with listening and sound. First, Ballard's characterisation of Proctor as a resonant subject, one operating predominantly in relation to the faculty of hearing, anticipates Connor's reading of audition as insufficient: for 'the auditory always leads to, or requires completion by other senses. The instability of the auditory self is such that it dissolves the very autonomy which seems to bring about the psychic unseating of the visual in the first place' (Connor 2004: 65). By extension, Proctor's reliance on hearing (and selective hearing, at that) merely reverses the sight/sound dynamic, thus reinforcing the bifurcation of vision and hearing rather than re-unifying the two senses. Secondly, Proctor's unawareness of, or refusal to engage with, the complex acoustic-visual histories of the air-raid shelter that he inhabits, suggests not only a limited understanding of the island's violent and traumatic histories, but also insufficient engagement with the sounds and signatures of those histories as they persist in the island's present.

It is through the figure of Maitland, then, that Ballard recasts the relationship between sight and sound in order to explore the island's long and diverse set of histories. This is Maitland conversing with himself:

'No point in going back to the car,' he told himself.

The grass seethed around him in the light wind, speaking its agreement.

'Explore the island now – drink the wine later.'

The grass rustled excitedly, parting in circular waves, beckoning him into its spirals.

Fascinated, Maitland followed the swirling motions, reading in these patterns the reassuring voice of this immense creature eager to protect and guide him. The spiral curves swerved through the inflamed air, the visual signature of epilepsy. His own brain – the fever, perhaps damage to his cerebral cortex ...

'Find a ladder – ?'

The grass lashed at his feet, as if angry that Maitland still wished to leave its green embrace. (Ballard 1985: 49-50)

A consistent feature of Maitland's locutions is that they take the form of the imperative, even when he is engaged in frequent conversations with himself. This is significant because it connects, in part, to the intertextual resonances of *Robinson Crusoe*, a philosophically-informed narrative of individualism and subjectivity written during the rise of modernity, which sees the eponymous hero triumph over adversity due to his mastering knowledge of the world and himself. The importance of vision as a basic survival technique therefore takes on a far greater philosophical significance for Defoe's hero: as Connor writes, 'Since Descartes, the self wills itself into being; this is an epistemological willing, or a will to know [...] Where knowing is associated so overwhelmingly with seeing, then the will-to-self-knowing of the epistemised self has unavoidably taken a scopic form' (2004: 54). A distant literary descendent of Crusoe, Maitland also understands himself initially as a 'seeing and self-seeing entity' (54). It is noticeable, for example, how frequently Maitland seeks a high vantage point from which to observe the island, be it the roof of his crashed car or an abandoned shelter, or Proctor's shoulders (Ballard 1985: 111). Although Maitland's decisions to seek out elevated positions are clearly part of an effective survival strategy, they also signal an ocularcentric conviction that he will go on to dominate the island and its territories by becoming the master of all that he surveys.

As the passage quoted above also indicates, however, the more time Maitland spends on the island, the less straightforward his relationship with it becomes. If vision 'signifies distance, differentiation, dominance' (Connor 2004: 54), then hearing and touch, two faculties that Maitland keenly develops as he begins to listen and respond to his environment, signify connection and equivalence. At one point, the interminably noisy grasses, which variously rustle, swirl, whistle, drum, tap, and vibrate in endless 'waves', appear to ally with Maitland when they dance and sound 'an urgent minuet' (Ballard 1985: 23) in a bid to wake him up from an injury- and alcohol-induced stupor. Ballard's anthropomorphic descriptions of the island's grasses signal a collapse in the solidity of boundaries between internal and external, human and non-human, conscious and unconscious, signalling, in turn, that the inner space of *Concrete Island* refuses to be experienced and understood in purely visual terms. To be sure, Ballardian inner space is rich in iconography and unusual perspectives, but it is also shaped and energised by diverse and tension-ridden sounds.

We hear this, for instance, in the verbs 'seethe' and 'lash', which are used to describe the grasses' 'voices'.¹ For all of their guidance and protection, the 'voices' of inner space are resonant with aggression, agitation and restlessness. Maitland's physical and psychological fusion with the island is therefore not as 'therapeutic and redemptive' (Ballard 1996: 84) as Ballard would have us believe:

His movement across this forgotten terrain was a journey not merely through the island's past but through his own [...] Identifying the island with himself, he gazed at the cars in the breaker's yard, at the wire-mesh fence, and the concrete caisson

behind him. The places of pain and ordeal were now confused with pieces of his body [...] He spoke aloud [...] 'I am the island'. (Ballard 1985: 51-2)

It is telling that Maitland's gaze places various sites of trauma in disquieting relation with himself and each other, for Ballard's Surrealist technique of juxtaposition works specifically here to mobilise alternative histories and unexpected connections through forms of associative enquiry. Indeed, the wire-mesh fence, which symbolically divides the past and the present, is intrinsically pervious, meaning that the violent physical and psychological histories of World War II embedded in the concrete caissons are brought into productive dialogue with the bodies of wrecked cars (some of which may still contain human traces) and Maitland's own shattered mind and body.

In this respect, *Concrete Island* follows the Surrealist historiographical ambitions of previous texts such as *Crash*, which explores the wounded physical and psychological landscapes of twentieth-century history and culture through the photographic image. Vaughan, the 'nightmare angel of the expressways' (Ballard [1973] 1995: 84) and photographer of history, races to car crashes equipped with 'cameras, a tripod, a carton packed with flashbulbs. A cine-camera [...] fastened to a dashboard clamp' (63) in order to take extreme close-ups and unusual angles of mangled cars and bodies:

The leitmotiv of this photographic record emerged as I recovered from my injuries: my relation sips, mediated by the automobile and its technological landscape, with my wife, Renata and Dr Helen Remington. In these crude photographs, Vaughan had frozen my uncertain embraces [...] He had caught my hand stretching across the transmission tunnel of my wife's sports car, the inner surface of my forearm dented by the chromium gear lever [...] Vaughan] turned through the photographs, now and then titling the album to emphasise an unusual camera angle for me. (101-2)

Even though Vaughan's photographic practices possess deeply disturbing voyeuristic and erotic dimensions, the image archive he exhibits nevertheless installs moments of critical and historical reflection. By isolating, and bearing witness to, that which threatens to pass unnoticed and undocumented, be it the histories of a crushed door, a blood-soaked seat, or the conjunction of soft flesh and hard car components, Vaughan's image archive encourages James to see himself, other people, and his relationship with the technocratic world around him differently. But while *Crash* flaunts its spectacles of pain, bringing images of intense suffering and mutilation into the reader's view whether we want to see them or not, *Concrete Island* partially conceals its histories of 'pain and ordeal' in images of half-buried ammunitions bunkers, subsiding graveyards, and half-concealed air-raid shelters. This is because the later novel registers a significant development in Ballard's Surrealist historiographic practice as it makes room for histories to sound. We hear this in a particularly resonant moment when Maitland has difficulties focussing his vision, so he uses his crutch to touch and sound his way across the island: 'The crutch rang out against a metal object underfoot, an iron plaque set into a fallen gravestone. He was standing in an abandoned churchyard' (Ballard 1985: 30). In an act of spatial mapping

that is also an act of temporal mapping, Maitland is, to borrow R. Murray Schafer's neologism, an 'earwitness' (2004: 3) to history before he is an eyewitness. Tuned in to the sonic properties of the material landscape, Maitland is not only better able to orientate himself within the island's 'peculiar topography' (Ballard 1985: 30); he also becomes alive to its historical diversity, touching, hearing and eventually realising that '[p]arts of the island dated from well before World War II' (50).²

Sound and vision are less in tension in *Concrete Island*, then, than they are in 'touch' with one another. The sonorous, as Nancy observes, does not 'dissolve' the visible, 'but rather enlarges it; it gives it an amplitude' (2007: 2). In other words, hearing leads to seeing differently. This certainly becomes Maitland's experience. Listening attentively to the island's polyphony of voices, sounds and vibrations, he looks again at the island's historical signatures:

Maitland climbed on to the roof of an abandoned air-raid shelter. Resting here, he inspected the terrain more carefully. Comparing it with the motorway system, he saw that it was far older than the surrounding terrain, as if this triangular patch of waste ground had survived by the exercise of a unique guile and persistence, and would continue to survive, unknown and disregarded, long after the motorways had collapsed into dust. (Ballard 1985: 50)

Maitland's inspections of the island's derelict monuments, abandoned architectures and disused objects are valuable because they go a long way to conveying a sense of the landscape's rich, collective histories. Furthermore, his detailed observations, which often read like lists, invite classification in the following terms. On the one hand, the island is home to a visual archive of the forgotten past, figured in architectural forms as various as: an abandoned churchyard; a subsiding graveyard; ground-courses of Edwardian terraced houses; air-raid shelters; a Civil Defence post; the ground-plan of a postwar cinema; material remains of once inhabited streets. On the other hand, the island houses a visual archive of the exhausted future, which manifests itself in piles and piles of technological refuse: wrecked cars; discarded tyres; worn-out steel cables; broken headlights; scrapped engine parts; metal drums; broken office furniture (amongst many other items) (Ballard 1985: 29, 50, 51). What is striking about these visual archives is the way in which they are locked in to one another, even fused together in some instances to form static monuments, for instance when Ballard writes: 'The breaker's yard and its wrecked cars had been superimposed on the still identifiable streets and alleyways' (50). Even though the process of superimposition allows traces of the historical past to remain in view, it does so in a way that preserves and stabilises them, ensuring that embedded historical memories and experiences remain still and under control. One way of activating the static histories and memories manifest in these visual archives, however, is to turn an ear towards them. As Nancy observes: 'Whereas visible [...] presence occurs in a motionless "at the same time," sonorous presence is essentially mobile "at the same time"' (2007: 16). Sound, in other words, behaves very differently to vision; far from being an object to be fixed in view, sound is constantly on the move, omnipresent, permeating and resonating with objects, spaces and other sounds. For these very reasons,

sound cannot, as Gandy observes, 'be organised into a form of collective memory that is amenable to archives, monuments' (2014: 39). Instead, sound is counter-historical in impulse, mobilising memories and histories in ways that challenge order and fixity.

This brings me back to the rather conspicuous nature of some of the auditive verbs that sound throughout *Concrete Island*:

The exploding air reflected from the concrete parapet seemed to detonate inside Robert Maitland's skull [...] Maitland could remember little more of the crash than the sound of the exploding tyre [...] A horn blared warningly [...] Horns blared endlessly [...] air-brakes [switched] on and off in a series of sharp detonations. (Ballard 1985: 7, 15, 16, 32)

Verbs such as 'to explode', 'to detonate' and 'to blare' are resonant because they communicate so much more than the potentially violent realities of contemporary car travel. Indeed, these auditive verbs chime with the island's abandoned architectures of historical violence; namely, with the derelict, and ostensibly silent, air-raid shelters, half-buried ammunitions bunkers, and subsiding graveyards. In 'Silence is Golden', Breton reminds the reader that the Surrealist artist seeks consistently to 'do violence' to sense by bringing disparate sounds and objects together in order to generate unexpected associations (1978: 268). Prompting associative auditory connections between exploding tyres and exploding bombs, or the warning sounds of car horns and the warning sounds of air-raid sirens, Ballard's soundscape not only does violence to our understanding of history by restoring sound to World War II histories that had otherwise been rendered inaudible and therefore forgotten; it also diminishes the temporal, psychological and imaginative distances between the listening subject and historical experience. In moments of listening to the soundscape of the present, *Concrete Island* suggests, the noises of history will sound and resound through us, going some way to reunifying us with historical events and experiences that we had deemed to be lost and imperceptible.

If '[h]earing is a way of touching at a distance' (Schafer 2004: 9) in *Concrete Island*, a means of engaging with the past as it reverberates in the present, it is also a way of seeing at a distance, a method for renewing historical perspective, and expanding our historical understanding. In this respect, a significant achievement of *Concrete Island* is that it ushers in a revitalised form of Surrealist historiography. Echoing Breton's postwar Surrealist ambitions in 'Silence is Golden', *Concrete Island* recasts the relationship between hearing, seeing and subjectivity in order to make room for silent histories to sound and hidden histories to come into view. In turn, Ballard's Surrealist historiographic impulses demand a new kind of reader or 'listening subject', one who is as much an earwitness to history as an eyewitness, and one who, refusing to keep history at a distance as an object to be seen, is open to the vibrations and voices of history in all of their ambivalence, uncertainty and complexity. For the reader, as listening subject, a further significant achievement of *Concrete Island* lies in the kinds of imaginative historical questions that the text engenders; we are encouraged therefore not just to ask what does World War II sound like, but to what extent is World War II still sounding? This latter question is not meant to be rhetorical, but a serious prompt to further reconceive the ways in which we hear, see,

think and write about history. Gandy is exactly right, I think, when he suggests that 'the sonic realm' of Ballard's fictions 'has both a temporal and spatial porosity. There is a sense that sound, like memory, cannot be completely eradicated' (2014: 39). Just as historical memories – predominantly violent, traumatic and painful – persist across the Ballardian imagination, deforming creatively and critically the conscious and unconscious landscapes inhabited by his characters, so the sounds and pulsations of history insist on making themselves heard and felt. Sound matters, for Ballard, because matter sounds. It is only by turning an ear to the world and to ourselves as resonant and historical subjects in the world that we will begin to see ourselves and our histories differently.

Notes

¹ For further discussion of Ballard's representation of grass in *Concrete Island*, see Sue Robertson's (2016) contribution to this special issue.

² For a speculative yet fascinating urban history of *Concrete Island*, see Bonsall (2008).

Works Cited

- Amis, M. (1996) 'Cronenberg's Monster: Review of Ballard's *Crash* and Cronenberg's film adaptation'. *Independent on Sunday*, 10 November 1996. [Online] [Accessed 30 July 2015]. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/cronenbergs-monster-1351611.html>.
- Ballard, J. (1985) *Concrete Island*. London: Panther.
- Ballard, J. (1995). *Crash*. London: Vintage.
- Ballard, J. (1996) 'The Coming of the Unconscious.' *In User's Guide to the Millennium*. London: Flamingo, pp. 84-88.
- Ballard, J. (2001) *J. G. Ballard: The Complete Short Stories*. London: Flamingo.
- Bonsall M. (2008) 'The Real Concrete Island?' *Ballardian* [Online] [Accessed 30 July 2015]. <http://www.ballardian.com/the-real-concrete-island>.
- Breton, A. (1972) *Surrealism and Painting*. S. Watson Taylor (trans). London: MacDonald.
- Breton, A. (1978) 'Silence is Golden.' *In* Rosemont, F. (ed) *What is Surrealism? Selected Writings by André Breton*. New York: Monad Press, pp. 265-269.
- Connor, S. (2004) 'Sound and the Self.' *In* Smith, M. (ed) *Hearing History: A Reader*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, pp. 54-66.
- Defoe, D. (2008) *Robinson Crusoe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gandy, M. (2014). 'Strange Accumulations: Soundscapes of late modernity in J. G. Ballard's 'The Sound-Sweep.' *In* Gandy, M. and Nilsen, B. (eds) *The Acoustic City*. Berlin: Jovis Verlag, pp. 33-39.
- Gasiorek, A. (2005) *J. G. Ballard*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Golding, W. (2015) *Pincher Martin*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Kafka, F. (1995) *The Complete Stories*. Berlin: Schocken Books.
- Kahn, D. (1997) 'John Cage: Silence and Silencing.' *The Musical Quarterly*, 81, pp. 556-598.

- Merriman, P. (2007) *Driving Spaces: A Cultural-Historical Geography of England's M1 motorway*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Nancy, J. (1966) *Esprit*, 12(December), pp. 848-849.
- Nancy, J. (2007) *Listening*. Charlotte Mandell (trans). New York: Fordham University Press.
- Night Mail* (1964) [Film] Directed by: Basil Wright and Harry Watt. UK, GPO Film Unit.
- Robertson, S. (2016) 'Grass in an Expanding Field: Sensing the Unmapped in *Concrete Island*.' *Literary Geographies*, 2(1), pp. 31-47.
- Savage, J. (1978) 'An Interview with J. G. Ballard.' *Search and Destroy* 10 [Online] [Accessed 30 July 2015]. http://www.jgballard.ca/media/1978_reprinted_1988_search%26destroy_newspaper.html.
- Schaeffer, P. (2007) 'Acousmatics.' In Cox, C. and Warner, D. (eds) *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*. London: Continuum, pp. 76-81.
- Schafer, R.M. (2004) 'Soundscapes and Earwitnesses.' In Smith, M. (ed) *Hearing History: A Reader*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, pp. 3-9.
- Shakespeare, W. (2011) *The Tempest*. London: Arden Shakespeare.
- Toop, D. (2010) *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener*. London: Continuum.